DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 275 118 EC 190 649

AUTHOR Kravetz, Nathan
TITLE Defining the Humanities Curriculum for the Gifted.
PUB DATE Apr 86
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the California Humanities Association (17th, Claremont, CA, April 18-20, 1986).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Education; Curriculum Development; *Curriculum Enrichment; Elementary Secondary Education; Females; *Gifted; *Humanities Instruction; Talent Identification; Teacher Influence

ABSTRACT

Inclusion of the humanities (literature, languages, philosophy, and history) in the educational experiences of gifted students is recommended. The role of the teacher is paramount in developing a humanities curriculum for the gifted. Curriculum choices are often based on identifying an observed talent or interest and offering the student more of those learning experiences. Thus, children are labeled in terms of already demonstrated aspects of giftedness. Instead, it is suggested that the curriculum challenge gifted students in areas with which they are not already familiar or proficient. Opening the humanities to gifted students is recommended, especially to those who have already "specialized" in the sciences or mathematics. The unique problems of gifted girls are addressed, and it is noted that they are entitled to exposure and success in the full curriculum, not just in those subjects to which society tends to assign them. (JW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED275118

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

DEFINING THE HUMANITIES CURRICULUM FOR THE GIFTED

Dr. Nathan Kravetz, Professor Emeritus of Education
City University of New York (Lehman College)
and California State University (San Bernardino)

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nathan Kravetz
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

California Humanities Association
17th Annual Conference
Claremont, California
April 18-20, 1986

I have chosen to consider the curricular needs of gifted students in the general area of the humanities. Too often, over recent years, the gifted student has been enticed, if not urged and pressed, into the curriculums of the hard sciences and mathematics. His early educational involvement is considered to be important for the country in its continuing development and necessary for the student himself if he is to be a successful professional and a worthy, contributing citizen.

While many gifted students have shown themselves to be able and eager to work in mathematics and the hard sciences, for their sake and for the sake of our common social condition, more consideration is needed. This is not to say that gifted children should not choose those professions in which they are most proficient and to which they are most

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

dedicated. In fact, no child should be urged into a life's work that does not meet the important conditions of the child's ability and his love for that work. Yet the humanities have too often been given short shrift in the educational experiences of gifted students. They have not been provided as a testing ground for the potential growth of the student.

The Meaning of "Humanities"

To offer a definition of the humanities, I begin with the arts in all their traditional and developing forms; I note literature and languages; the broad and enticing realms of philosophy belong here; the need to include history should be self-evident. These then are the fundamental subject areas of the humanities.

They are the ancient and the modern stuff of what people have thought and what they have wrought. The first part of the word HUMANITIES reflects how mankind in its continual effort to think and to do has built a treasury for itself. The treasury contains within it those ideas that have always occupied us while we contemplated the stars and while we looked within ourselves. The subject matter of the humanities is a total curriculum of knowing, thinking, feeling, and ultimately of expressing and communicating. It rests upon experience, thought, and language.

In considering the processes of human learning, I refer to the concepts of input and output. Or, as some might rather have it, the humanities reflect mankind's impressions

and then the eventual expressions about human experiences. So it has been with the arts and artists; so, too, with literature, history, and philosophy in all their forms.

The humanities as they are experienced may not necessarily be a preparation for a good job or for a successful business, or even for the development of important research. They offer the subject matter that "speaks" to the individual, to the person he has been, to what he is going to be, and to his evolving role(s) as he relates to others.

Traditionally, a school humanities curriculum begins in the kindergarten: it provides opportunities for the child to be with other children, but for each one there will be unique experiences. The child finds materials to touch, handle, move, and even change. In the child's early years play is, when it is not controlled or manipulated, truly creative. The child does, thinks, says, feels, and communicates. He says, "Look at my sand house. Feel my clay bowl. Look at how these sticks are spread out. Look at THIS horse that I painted!"

But with the recent pressures for measurable achievement and therefore school placement, there has been a denial of play in the schools; a minimum of creative language expression; a loss of opportunities to handle new and unknown materials and objects. Even so-called "discovery" is tightly controlled and planned thoroughly in advance by concerned teachers. The rote-learning formalities of reading and arithmetic now replace the informalities of trying out words,

of hearing stories read, and of counting and moving objects.

Story-telling is minimized and so is "playing" with words, rhyming them, twisting them, contorting and mixing them. We follow the dictates of mass-produced workbooks, purple ditto sheets, and textbooks that often say little which might lead children to the pleasures of learning.

Without examining all the grades in our schools, it is my view that what could be the humanities for all the children is seldom the humanities for any of them. The curriculum is divided into a number of tight compartments, in a kind of protective bureaucratic structure, where the parts are excessively fixed and without relation to one another. Teachers are made to feel that such separateness is the necessary basis for learning and that their own effectiveness as instructors is best established by their specialized expertise regarding the contents of one compartment.

It is the essence of the humanities that they cannot be so compartmentalized, dealing as they do with the overlapping major concerns of humanity. But their proper place in the curriculum has been lost from view. The humanities are touched upon in K-12 courses of language, literature, and the arts--but they are aimed at the constraints and limitations of curriculum rather than at its expansive potential for the learner. Frontiers are demarcated which we dare not traverse. We do too little to teach, to lead, toward those concepts that would involve the humanities in such subject areas as government, social studies, mathematics and sciences. It is difficult to deal with (and test) the

HOW and the WHY of subject matter and we prefer the more easily accessible WHAT, the WHEN, and the WHO!

With regard to the gifted, we make even more serious errors in developing an appropriate curriculum.

Defining the Gifted Student

Since numerous volumes attempt to explain what a gifted person is, it would be appropriate to offer a summary here that represents a consensus.

Researchers have offered their statements; the general public out in the world has its definitions (often with a touch of either awe or ridicule); teachers whose experiences encompass all kinds of children have reported their views; and almost more important than any, parents (often bemused and unbelieving) describe the child who has grown before their very eyes into something called gifted.

In the long run, the greatest agreement in arriving at a definition seems to come with parents and researchers. Teachers, for reasons sometimes out of their control, may "find" some of the gifted, but often they overlook a child's special abilities or find him difficult to deal with because of their overwhelming responsibilities toward all the students in a class.

Let it be stipulated that the gifted student, at any age, tends to be a rapid learner in contrast with others of his age. He responds quickly to the subject matter provided, whether in class presentations by the teacher or in texts. He is curious about what he sees as well as about what he doesn't see. He asks questions and will look for answers

almost anywhere. He seeks answers and will tend to apply what he finds to current situations or to other questions. He generalizes from given information and approaches new situations with a more substantial foundation than when he began. He often asks "Why? How? How come?"

The gifted child perseveres, sticks to a problem or a process as long as he finds it interesting. He is not easily discouraged or deflected. He tends to have a very good memory, recalling facts, events, ideas, and impressions. He experiences the convergence of memories and associations and is able to make new associations.

Often, but not always, the gifted child is articulate and uses the language effectively. Often, but not always, the gifted child has multi-faceted interests and skills. He may be a rapid learner and an early "producer" in mathematics, science, and music. He may show precocious ability in literature, languages, and history. In a suitable environment, the gifted student shows advanced capacity in several of these subject areas at the same time. He becomes a devourer of books of all kinds, a self-directed experimenter in the sciences. Too often he is a solitary recluse who ordinarily has little in common with his classmates.

Yet, when he finds himself in a community of gifted peers, he flourishes, thrives, blossoms, and grows. He learns from them what he has not yet experienced. He is called to order by one or more who have already examined the

problems which he may still be trying to solve. He learns that being a rapid learner means something different in such a group than in the so-called "regular" class.

With his peers, he is no recluse for long, but he may be articulate, stimulated to listening, to learning, and, perhaps, to leadership.

For those who want a quantitative definition, we turn to the IQ and locate those students who score above some set figure. This might be 120, or 125, or 130, or more, depending upon the kind of selectiveness that is wanted by those who choose. Further, it can be the achievement tests that serve to define the student who functions at the gifted level; testing at least two years above the expected level of the student's grade in a subject may be considered a sign of giftedness.

In these definitions of giftedness, attention has been given to the school subjects rather than to social or athletic prowess, or to those subjects which are only given peripheral attention in that curriculum. There is little doubt that in the curriculums of today's schools a Mozart or a Picasso would have hardly been discovered or encouraged.

Defining a Curriculum for the Gifted

Ideally, the school and its curriculum combine to offer the learner a challenge to find out, to examine, to test. An appropriate curriculum presents an open door to unknowns in which the more readily known is absorbed and which then leads

toward further exploration and recognition of other unknowns. Thus the learner moves from experience to experience, with the guidance of the thoughtful teacher who plans for such sequences of experiences.

Learning takes place for any student, as Bruner has said, when the steps in the process are flexible, adequate for the readiness of the learner, and particularly when they offer the important experience of success, no matter how small.

Bloom, in recently describing the processes that work for the gifted, uses the term "automaticity". He refers to what many of us have observed and experienced,--that special speed and fascinating continuity of thought that have defined the gifted.

In all curriculums, materials must provide incentives, not simply or even necessarily answers. Regardless of the medium, the student must face relevant information, facilitating processes, and a continuing opportunity for reflecting upon, assessing, and communicating what he has experienced.

Thus the role of the teacher must encompass the preparation and/or selection of materials, the scheduling of time, and the strength to be consistent in <u>not</u> providing answers. Rather it is the task of the teacher to ask those questions that will stimulate the student to reflect, to compare what he knows with what he wants to know, to try out his views or responses without fear of penalty. If the teacher is able to serve as provider of experiences, he may

of course offer his views also on what interests the student. And, as may be reasonable, the teacher ought to be able to ask questions which in themselves call for thought or for action on the student's part, though not necessarily for a fixed response.

It should be evident that in the development of a humanities curriculum for the gifted, the role of the teacher is paramount. It is first the teacher who must be educated in the subjects that are denoted "HUMANITIES". In addition, the teacher is also that professional whose training and temperament combine to bring into play what Gage has called the art of teaching.

Curriculum Choices For Gifted

With special attention to the humanities curriculum for the gifted, there are two possible paths: the easy and the difficult. Taking the easy path, the gifted student is identified as to his special interests and talents. He is, in effect, labeled in terms of those aspects of giftedness that he has already shown.

The teacher and the curriculum, therefore, take the easy path by offering the gifted student more of those experiences which he has already found to be comfortable and highly motivating. Often such gifted ones may not be at ease with or aware of the contents of the humanities. They are computer-bound, science and electronics oriented, and too willing to proceed along those lines which have already drawn

the attention of their families, their teachers, and their peers.

Teachers, in organizing a curriculum, may therefore offer more materials in these areas, assigning special topics and extra homework. They encourage the gifted to continue along that development which already seems to offer career opportunities, regardless of the present age of the child. Often parents accept such curriculum experiences and join with teachers in providing for the early assignment of a specialization for the gifted child.

The child is seen as having made his choice and the seemingly extraneous or less motivating aspects of curriculum and of living are left to their peripheral status. In too many cases, therefore, the focus is placed on the development of gifted students along the roads they have chosen to follow, and the efforts of teachers, parents, and other school people serve to enhance and facilitate that relatively easy decision.

Thus the easy path in curriculum offers a way that is facile for the student. He is led to areas and topics that are readily available: if he inclines toward mathematics, then he gets more math. If he is showing accomplishment in the sciences, then the school provides more science. When he appears to shine in literature, music, or a graphic art, then the easy path is to concentrate on those. If he is a good reader and an early writer, then that's what his curriculum favors. And so it goes, for all the above, including the

sports skills which loom so large in our social contexts.

But what we should consider is another path, not so easy, not so readily achieved by the gifted student, or so easily handled by the teacher. There are those subjects of the curriculum in which the student has little or no experience. He is already "majoring" in the "easy" ones. Yet what is education really for? It is to provide experiences and opportunities in as many important fields as possible, especially those less well known, less easily mastered, more challenging, equally worth while. In our contemporary culture, this must include the subjects of the humanities.

For the gifted, such opportunities are the means of building their resources and giving them entree to the skills and knowledges which they have not dealt with or mastered. Consider the cultures they do not know. The arts they have not examined or handled. The purposes of education include the development of the whole learner, not just those areas where he is quickly and readily proficient.

In the not-so-easy path, the curriculum must challenge the gifted to work along the lines they know the least about. Are they already "specialized" in the sciences or in math? Then open the humanities to them. The study of man's experiences in ancient and recent times--a study of history--conveys the people and their lives, their times, the conditions within which they struggled or succumbed, and the controversies that occupied them.

Gifted students must be enabled to understand what science meant in other times, in other places, and to other people. They must recognize how science developed and how the writings that are available to us express the conditions of scientists as they worked. Scientists worked alongside mathematicians and magicians; playwrights dramatized their efforts, giving clear indications of their place in the societies of their times. Philosophers asked why and suggested not only answers but how to reason toward any answers.

In the writings of other times gifted students may find the earliest means of clarifying ideas. Authors described their thoughts and their attempts to place them into action. Yet there were political problems to face, religious matters to confront, and the ever-changing social forces that showed fluctuations of strength and weakness. In curriculums for the gifted, uses of original sources, recourse to contemporary thinkers about the history and development of science, and the thoughts of the gifted themselves become part of the experiences we call education.

In the humanities curriculum for the gifted, the student is educated to ponder what he reads, to examine and evaluate the concepts offered, and to communicate his own ideas about all this in some appropriate form. But in this curriculum, he deals not only with **what** happened, with **who** was there, with **when** it was, but with **how** such events took place, and **why**.

The gifted student is encouraged to understand and explain how all of that got from there to here. If he is convinced, he reports and urges conviction upon us. If he is a skeptic, he challenges the conformity of established convictions until others join him or, possibly, he reduces his skepticism and joins them. He is able to communicate his thoughts and we can understand what he now thinks and knows.

The arts are also personal experiences, intense, sometimes private for any given individual. The humanities curriculum shows the gifted student (who may or may not be talented in the arts) how emotion and expression are related and how a format is available by which the individual is able to express ideas and emotions.

Does the graphic or musical artist say his idea? No, he does something that communicates by means of his chosen format or technique what his emotions were or what his idea is. Programmed music tells the story that the artist wants to tell. Other music lets the listener decide what the artist felt and learn what a listener's task is.

The Processes of the Humanities Curriculum

There is no requirement that the student be a competent musician or painter, though he may in fact turn out to be one or both. At the very least, the curriculum offers the student the opportunity to handle materials, to touch, see, and hear the tools and equipment used by artists. Not only does he try out the experience in its most fundamental aspects, but he learns the problems with which artists in

their various media must cope. He can meet the artist directly or through his work.

In the humanities curriculum, the gifted student must do more than read, look at the products of the creative artists, listen to music and poetry, and consider them in the abstract. He ought to understand the work of the artist and the poet, to visit them in their places of labor, and to receive them as visitors in the school itself.

In studying history, gifted students should recognize the different approaches of historians and to understand that telling it like it was may depend upon who is doing the telling. Thus, in reading a contemporary work and discussing its intentions, its meanings, and its conclusions, ideally the student should be able to confront **this** historian directly or in writing. And then why not query that **other** historian for another view of history and its interpreters.

Gifted students can undertake similar interactions with novelists, dramatists, and poets--but always with a good and thoughtful prior experience with what these creative people have done and written. I would urgently propose that students examine and challenge other important communicators of their time and place: journalists, political figures (elected or not), and scientists as well as industrialists and business people.

What matters is both the method of the curriculum and its content. The student is challenged to examine those elements of the humanities with which he is **least**

experienced. He comes to an understanding of what the humanities have brought to mankind. Then he may face them in their immediate, contemporary context and interpret their values and meanings in modern conditions.

Eventually, the gifted student is encouraged, enticed even, to communicate, to write, to draw, to perform in all or any of those subjects. At all reasonable times, education must elicit the student's expression as output not only as a means of determining the extent of the value that has been added to the learner as an individual, but as providing another opportunity for the student to feel and tell. He learns and shares; sees and describes; gives back in his own personal fashion a portion of what he has experienced.

Special Problems for the Gifted

Though emphasis has been placed upon the traditional subjects of the humanities, such educational processes may be applied to all the ways in which the gifted students develop their skills and talents. Thus this student may be introduced even to those less familiar skills under the too-general rubric of games or physical education.

When the gifted child reports on his school "physical education" experiences of being left out, chosen last (and that with reluctance), we discover that he often continues in later years to be unwilling and inexperienced in those same skills. On reading and discussing Plato in their humanities class the gifted can be encouraged to develop the sound body that must accompany the sound mind. But then physical

education in the schools will have to be organized on Greek lines rather than with the discriminatory systems we now have.

To lean further on the REPUBLIC, we need to remind ourselves that girls and women were not excluded from Plato's perfect society. With our humanities curriculum having brought all students into its benevolent compass, we must avoid the stereotypes that bind girls to certain subjects as being best and right for them. Such assignment of the arts and literature to girls and women represents another form of the easy path we have discussed earlier. The myths that pervade our culture along these lines must be dispelled, starting with the curriculum of the lower schools.

Girls are entitled to succeed in the full curriculum of the school and must not be assigned arbitrarily to certain ones and kept just as arbitrarily from others. As we address all our gifted students to the arts, so we must not bar the girls from philosophy and history. Even more crucial in their school experiences is their unequal participation in just those subjects for which society has tended to mark them as "unsuited".

While this discussion is focused upon the humanities for the gifted, we must take account of the problems of girls and women as regards mathematics and the so-called harder sciences. For many years it has been erroneously asserted that such subjects are not "right" for girls; they do not do well in them; their physiology causes them to be lesser achievers in spite of their recognized giftedness. Further,

current culture prefers that women and girls not exceed their male peers in doing math and science; doing better in these subjects makes them less available to be dates or, eventually, mates. Boys don't like the girls who succeed in such pre-empted fields.

And, often, as if to be in compliance with such societal and academic stereotypes, gifted girls--with known exceptions--do not seek to go further in math and science. They occupy their places in the junior and senior school classes to meet graduation requirements. They are usually passive, non-involved, takers of the back seats, and so get by. They tend to take no more advanced courses, to seek preparation in those fields, or to appear motivated or enthused in those subjects. The result is what we already know, --a relatively small number of college majors with even fewer advanced degrees in mathematics and geology, physics, astronomy, or chemistry.

Since our current stance on civil liberties calls for representation in the professions on the basis of membership in the population, our goals ought to be much higher than the current data show. True, in some fields there is a continuing slight increase of majors and advanced degrees, but the increase still does not approach the potential of enrollments and success for girls and women.

Having done considerable observation in the junior and senior high schools, I have learned that girls need encouragement and opportunity as would any deprived minority. They are too often passive in their classes; teachers tend to

acquiesce in such behavior; and the results are as indicated above. Girls do not continue their studies or do so against strong emotional, cultural, and educational odds.

One possible remedy might be for teachers to actively serve as "scouts" in seeking out gifted girls in their classes and offering special support, encouragement, and opportunities to participate effectively. Another approach might be to establish sections in mathematics and science for girls only--a form of segregation to which no one should object, since it would be on a volunteer basis. Have an advanced algebra section for boys and girls and one for girls only, preferably taught by a woman instructor. Having experienced such an "experiment", I have the testimony of girls, parents, and a teacher on behalf of this arrangement. We have the notable examples of private schools and colleges where girls participate more readily and successfully in all subjects of the curriculum. This arrangement should be available for the junior and senior high schools, primarily in mathematics and the sciences. (There is no evidence that the humanities offer the same problem for boys or for girls.)

The Role of the Teacher

To implement a humanities curriculum for gifted students, there is no question that the teacher must take a dynamic and serious part. As stated earlier, the teacher in such a curriculum should be infused with the humanities as both curriculum and way of life. Further, the teacher should

be able to relate to the learning styles of the gifted rather than to resist or require absolute conformity. Such requirement is often stifling in an ordinary curriculum; for the gifted in the humanities, it defies the very concept of what humanities are. Discipline in study, in discussion, in completion of assigned tasks is a sine qua non; it is the very basis for learning as opposed to conformity.

Too often the teacher calls for extra work as a means of enriching the experiences of the gifted. Extra work is not necessarily extra learning if the work is repetitious, boring, and where the student has already mastered the concepts. Leading the student into the curriculum that has been described above is the role of the teacher. Seeking for the student opportunities which are not ordinarily available nor considered traditional is another teacher task. It is also, we should emphasize, the effective principal's task for these students.

On occasion it has been suggested that gifted students make good tutors, that they teach the slower ones (or the younger ones) what they have not yet learned. One must ask what exactly this does for the gifted student. Is this the best use of educational time rather than extended studies, self-directed projects, or important reading and writing?

Certainly, he'll know there are slower learners, other kids who need help. But aside from that (which he already knows) what happens to his own learning? He is not an aide, a baby sitter for lower graders, a reader to the class while

the teacher does seatwork.

It has been said that he learns about people, others who have their problems. And he learns sympathy, empathy, and kindness. Maybe, but he should be learning those concepts from the experiences of his earliest years. He is not a remediation specialist or a tutor. He is not a counselor or a social worker.

The place where he should be a friend to man, to his peers, is where he and they meet on equal terms, in social and personal situations, in working teams, on the playground, in the library. There are children who need tutors, but the gifted student ought not be exploited by such servitude in the school.

To conclude, we note (paraphrasing Freeman Butts) that the humanities are the great heritage of human experience, the record of what men over the centuries and today have felt, thought and done in their unceasing quest for the good life.

The humanities are not opposed to the sciences; they are in fact complementary to them and give them purpose.

Immanuel Kant said that "Innocence is a wonderful thing, but it is easily seduced." Let the gifted learn through the humanities to enhance their thinking skills, to improve their skepticism, to be encouraged to ask why, how come, and says who? They should not be an easy mark for the surrounding social and intellectual scene in its exploitation

and its pursuit of fashions in style as well as in ideas.

What is now needed is more thought and more discussion, by parents and teachers, as to the further development of those among us who represent important human resources and as to the enhancement of their opportunity to learn to live the good life through the humanities. Finally, steps need to be taken to prepare and implement the appropriate curriculums so that discussion is, in itself, not an ending, but a beginning.

#

REFERENCES:

Bloom, Benjamin S., "Automaticity: The Hands and Feet of Genius," Educational Leadership, 43, 5 (1986).

Bruner, Jerome S., The Process of Education, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960.

Butts, R. Freeman, The Education of the West, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973.

Gage, N. L., The Scientific Basis of the Art of Teaching, New York: Teachers College Press, 1978.

Kravetz, Nathan, Single-Sex Classes for Gifted Students: A Case Report, ERIC ED 250 853, 1984.

_____ Looking at the Special Needs of Gifted Girls, ERIC ED 252 039, 1984.

_____ Pedagogy and Children's Literature: Amity or Hostility? An Examination of Education and the Literary Arts, ERIC ED 249 525, 1984.

_____ A Discrepancy Model for Meeting the Program Needs of the Gifted Child, ERIC ED 218 836, 1981.

#